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Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

Simeon D. Fess

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THE HUMANITY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

An Address by Simeon D. Fess, President of Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio, and Congressman from the Seventh Ohio District.

Delivered at

Minnesota State Educational Convention, Oct. 28, 1915,

held at

Minneapolis, Minnesota.

22

PRESIDENT H. L. MERRILL: I now have the pleasure of introducing Dr. Fess, President of Antioch College, and Congressman from the Seventh District of Ohio. (Applause)

PRESIDENT SIMEON D. FESS, Antioch College, Ohio:
Ladies and gentlemen, the program was arranged and the subject announced that I am to speak upon was selected because it was thought that a detailed statement of the humanity of a great American would not be out of place where a group of teachers had gathered. I confess as a member of the President's Vocational Commission which has sat in continuous session for four months outlining a plan of vocational education from the standpoint of Federal aid, that that subject would be a very interesting theme at this time for me to speak on. But I think I shall stay at the subject that has been announced for it is never a good thing to change when once an announcement is made.

I once called upon an elderly gentleman who knew President Lincoln very well. I was introduced to him as a student of this American and he took my hand and said, "Well my dear sir, what can I say to you about Abraham Lincoln that the world is not already familiar with? He was surely the best man I ever knew and all the inspiration I ever received as a minister of the Gospel came from meeting with him when he was President." And I stopped him at once and said, "This is what I want to have from you, what is it that would lead you to say that your inspiration as a minister of the Gospel came from him?" And he said, "Well sir, it is this way, I was a chaplain in the

army and I was detailed to make an investigation of the work of the Christian mission, and I made my report in Washington, and the President did me the honor of being present. And after I had finished reading my report he arose and came and took me by my hand and placed his left hand upon my shoulder and said, 'Young man the good God has endowed you with wonderful power to move upon men. You have started well, go on in the way you have started; pay more attention to the hearts of men, even though you cannot pay as much to their heads, for the world is not dying for the want of light for the intellect, but it is suffering for lack of qualities due to the heart.'

And this retired Presbyterian minister said to me, "That is the rule that I have followed in my preaching."

I have gone to a good many places and I have not allowed time or distance to interfere that I might find somebody who had a first impression of this great American in order that I might study his life in that way.

Some men make their places in history by what they say, others by what they do. A few of the world's great have made places by both what they have said and have done. No American has achieved more greatly from these two standpoints than Abraham Lincoln. And when I say to you that the writer of the Pickwick Papers or of David Copperfield need never have done anything other than what he said there, or of the Merchant of Venice need never have done anything because what he said was sufficient, I am only making ^a~~that~~ statement that can be fairly general. And when I say to you that the one who telegraphed three

weeks ago to our government agent at Arlington where our greatest wireless station is, one of the greatest in the world, when he said to him "I want to see whether I can speak to you without the aid of a wire" and when he spoke and was heard, he not only was heard but his voice was recognized,- that man need never say anything for he has made his place by what he has done. When he said to our government operator, "Connect me with San Francisco," and Mr. McCarthy, one of the keenest men in the application of electricity today, heard the voice of the President and recognized it and replied to the President who heard the voice of the speaker from San Francisco and recognized it, that was achievement enough. Then he said, "Connect me with Honolulu," and the voice was not only heard but recognized, speaking through a space of forty-six hundred miles, which means that in due time, not by the aid of the government necessarily, we will be speaking around the world without the aid of any medium other than the invisible. The man who was able to do that will not be remembered by what he has said, but by what he has done. And he is only one of the hundreds of doers in the world, and not of the especial men and women who say.

But Abraham Lincoln, fellow teachers and friends, has made a place very large in the world's history by what he said, and equally as important by what he did. "Broken by it I too may be; bow to it I never will", were the words that fell from his lips in 1854 when he was speaking on the question of slavery. "Could we tell where we are and whither we are drifting, we could tell better what to do and how to do it. We are now far in the

fifth year since the policy was inaugurated in the country with the avowed promise and the confident purpose of putting an end to this agitation. But under that agitation it cannot cease and it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. A house divided against itself cannot stand. This government cannot permanently endure half slave and half free. It will either become all one thing alike, slavery through the North as well as the South, or else it will be placed where the public will rest in the belief that that issue is in the course of ultimate extinction."

One of the most farreaching statements in the history of human rights since the morning stars sang together. The speaker was speaking in Springfield, Illinois, to a convention known at that time only in the state. That utterance made him quoted in every state of the Union, and also in the London Times, and by the largest publications of Prussia.

Then again in 1859, standing in Cooper Union speaking upon the sensitive question, no man ever put the issues so clearly, outlining the plan of campaign. "Could we believe with the South on slavery there would be no issue. Could they believe with us on the issue there would be no contention. Their thinking slavery right and our thinking it wrong is the precise point upon which turns the whole controversy. But thinking it wrong as we do we can yet afford to leave it where it now is because it is there by virtue of constitutional rights. But thinking it wrong as we do, can we afford to allow it to extend into northern territory?"

That was the issue, and no man ever stated it so clearly, and therefore measured by what he was saying he was an unusual figure. When I say to you, my friends, speaking to you as teachers, and speaking to you as a teacher, and saying, no man on the American platform could use the English language with the skill and expressiveness of Abraham Lincoln, I do not forget that he was not educated in the common schools. He said he went to school six months. That told the story. As a pupil he never owned a slate pencil or a slate, he never owned a lead pencil or a piece of paper. He had none of the conveniences that we now seem to suffer from because of their multiplicity, but he had a head filled with common sense, the most uncommon thing in the world this very hour, in my judgment. (Applause)

He would go to the fire and take out a piece of charcoal and whittle it to a point. That was his pencil. With it he would take the old fire shovel and turn it over and write and figure, and go out to the cooper shop and take a draw knife and shave the board smooth, and figure over it or write upon it, and then shave it off again. There, fellow teachers, is the making of one of the most regnant personalities that the history of the world knows.

When I say to you his power was wonderful, some of you might say, "Isn't it because you are an admirer of what he has accomplished and therefore use exaggerated statements?" No. It is not an exaggerated statement. The most famous teacher of rhetoric in one of America's greatest universities, a contemporary of Mr. Lincoln's followed him and studied him and he said to him

once in an interview, "What is the secret of your power? I have been following you from place to place to take parts of your speeches into my rhetoric classes and I use them as the finest specimens of English I have ever seen." And Mr. Lincoln looked at him in amazement and he said, "I had no knowledge that I had such power." He was assured that he had it and then he said, "Well the only thing I can remember about my study of English was, when I was a boy at home, when father and the neighbors would come and talk in language that I did not understand, it would annoy me and I would go to bed that night unable to sleep, and I would bound it on the north, south, east and west, until I thought I knew what they were talking about. And then when I had caught the idea I said to myself 'I will use the language, and I would use it with the boys with whom I played.'" And Professor Mark Bailey stopped and said, "Mr. Lincoln, that is the most splendid educational principle I have ever received from anyone." And Lincoln drew up his long form and said, "Why Professor, you don't say so."

He was always expressive but he was not always elegant. He would say, for example, "I will dump it into a hole." That is not elegant. Douglas never would say that. I use Douglas as an example because it was the debate between Lincoln and Douglas that brought these men prominently before the country as speakers. Douglas would have said, "I will deposit it in a cavity." That is elegant. Lincoln said, "I will dig a ditch." That is expressive. Douglas said, "I will excavate a channel." That is elegant, that is rhetoric. Lincoln said, "I was defeated

by bad luck, I ran at the wrong time." Douglas said, "It was due to a strange and fortuitous combination of unfortunate exigencies that never could have been foreseen."

Here stands Stephen A. Douglas the master of rhetoric, Abraham Lincoln the master of logic; Stephen A. Douglas eloquent in words, and Abraham Lincoln eloquent in thought. Stephen A. Douglas appealing to expediency,—"I don't care whether you vote slavery up or vote it down". Abraham Lincoln appealing to the heart law, "Is it not a false philosophy" said he to Douglas, "to build a system upon ^{the} a basis that you care nothing about what most people care the most about? You say, work and toil and earn bread and let somebody vote to see who shall eat it. But I say to you, my friend Douglas, that even the black man has as much right to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow as you or I have." Equal opportunity in the rivalry of this life was fundamental with the great savior of the nation's political integrity.

If you think I am speaking in terms of the very superlative as to his ability of speech, I have two bits of evidence that would be counted not only admissible by every lawyer, but fairly conclusive. Go over to Oxford England, to the university and tell them you are an American, and you would usually be taken into the main hall where they would point out a tablet to you. Read it. A short letter written to Mrs. Bixby of Massachusetts and signed A. Lincoln. That, the authorities in Oxford say is the finest letter of condolence in American or English literature. Mrs. Bixby was the mother of five boys.

All of them went to the war and all of them were killed, and when Mr. Lincoln saw it in the files of the War Department, his great soul flowed out through his pen to her, and it is one of the most beautiful things I have ever read. Time will not permit or I could quote it.

If that is not enough, go over to the British museum. Here are books sufficient, if piled on a single shelf to reach fourteen miles,- fourteen miles of books. Then ask those in authority what in their judgment is the finest short speech that is found in the English language. Do not be surprised when they hand it to you because it is so familiar. "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are equal",- and so on. So I could quote it in three minutes. When it was delivered, it was not by Governor Edward Everett, for he was the orator of the day and he had spoken two hours and a quarter,- when it was delivered the famous Governor of Massachusetts arose from the platform and walked across to take the hand of the President of the nation. And he said, "Mr. President, I would surely be a happy man if I could flatter myself that I had put the issue so squarely in two hours and a quarter, as you have put it in two minutes and a quarter. #

High confirmation of that short speech is in the British museum, that is as high a standard as I say any man could name, and yet while the world says that is the very highest reach in Lincolnian expression, I do not think it is the high

water mark, and I do not believe you think so. Emerson once said, "If you want to test expression, look at the sentiment whether it is refined or not." And he made the statement that refined sentiment usually will find appropriate language.

If you judge it from the Emerson standpoint listen to these words, but before we hear them we must see the situation. Four years at war and nearly six hundred thousand boys, north and south, filled premature graves; a billion dollars of expenses paid; awful and ugly utterances against the head of the nation; almost brutal were the attacks and assaults, yet in the face of it notice him as he stands on the east portico of the capitol. He said, "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. But if it be Heaven's will that it shall continue until all of the wealth that has been piled up by two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall have been sunk into the earth, and every drop of blood that has been drawn by the lash shall be repaid by another drawn by the sword, yet His judgments are righteous altogether, With malice toward none and with charity for all."

Who could have said that under those circumstances? Not I, and I fear not you. But this great soul could, and he meant it. "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us go on and finish the work, and to bind up the nation's wounds and to care for the fatherless and the widows and for the soldier who has borne the brunt of the battle," and so on.

Fellow teachers, that is the high water mark, I think,

in all that Mr. Lincoln has ever said. Measuring him in the very brief time that is allotted, on what he says, I have mentioned here two as starting points or measuring points.

Now what shall I say about what he did? Just briefly, the critical question was not the abolition of slavery, slavery must be abolished, and will be, whether Mr. Lincoln will do it or not. Slavery is indicted by the civilization of the century and it had to go, just as I think the American saloon must go ultimately in our own country. (Applause) And therefore when Mr. Lincoln was almost brutally vilified by the best men of the nation like Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison, the finest type of the spiritual movement in a great cause, what could Lincoln do? He wouldn't dare act until the time was ripe, and the greatest struggle was not to be taken off his feet and therefore do a thing which was not yet written in the blood of our own people so that it would not be permanent at the time that it is done. And consequently his fight was to preserve the nation in order that freedom ultimately might be the goal of our citizenship.

So that was his fight. Now the one man he had to fight was Horace Greeley because Greeley said he was an opportunist and did not act when he should. But had Abraham Lincoln acted on the behest of these great leaders, I fear that you would sit today under a divided republic. And the reason you are under a united republic is that we had Abraham Lincoln at the head of the nation at a critical moment. There is one act. It is an omission on their part.

We had a struggle between the slave and the free states. Mr. Lincoln instantly saw that the sensible issue was to split the south on slavery, so he called Henry Winter Davis of Maryland and said to Davis, "Hold Maryland, Maryland is a slave state, hold Maryland, and you will do a greater work than I can do, for holding Maryland will split the south on the slavery question." And to a great Kentuckian he said, "Hold Kentucky". To one of the great Missourians he said, "Hold Missouri"; to one of the Delawarians he said, "Hold Delaware" and he would have them constantly with him in conference. It was Lincoln that split the south on that sensitive question and forbade the neutral states going over to the south. That is another act. Usually it is not noted.

We had a very untoward incident in the capture of the Trent and the taking off of Mason and Slidell, and when it was done the man who did it was feasted and toasted and banqueted. But Lincoln said, "That won't do, we fought one war against the right of search, and now we must not begin it." And he took the correspondence of William H. Seward, the scholarly diplomat, the greatest in the land, the educated man, the trained man, the diplomatist,- he took his correspondence and he took his blue pencil and blue penciled two thirds of it. And he said "Seward, you will have this nation in a war with England in less than threemonths. One war at a time is all we can stand."

I think it is the North American Review, in the March number of 1876 that gives a duplication of this correspondence, blue pencil and all, that is worth the study of the teacher.

Think of it, Lincoln untaught, untrained, uneducated as the world would say, blue penciling the correspondence of the greatest diplomats in this country. That is another act that stands out. The nation's freedom was made possible and Lincoln played a great part. The nation's preservation was a reality and Lincoln played a great part.

But my theme was the humanity of it, and just an incident or two. I have got one rule I live by, and that is not to go overtime. But if you will stay with me five minutes I will tell you something I want to say. That goes over I think, about four minutes, but I assume you will stay anyway. I

interviewed, I think, the greatest editor of the country, Charles A. Dana, who was Assistant Secretary of War during Lincoln's administration. I interviewed him just a few months before he died, and I said to him, "What is your estimate of Lincoln's greatest power?" And as quick as a flash he said, "His control of men." Now let it stand there, I cannot emphasize it,- the control of men. I said to him, "He did not control Stanton did he?" "Oh yes he did." And I said, "The world don't think so, and I have been a student of Lincoln and I have always thought that Stanton had his way." And he said, "You are mistaken, you are just like the world." And he said, "Lincoln would let Stanton blow and blow until he blew out and then he used to use him like putty in his fingers. Stanton always did as Lincoln wanted him to" he said. And he told this incident.

A blanket manufacturer down in Baltimore had been discovered selling blankets to the Confederates. That is treason.

Stanton at once charged the whole group with treason and put them in prison, in a martial manner, a military manner. And then Congressman Thomas had come up from Baltimore to plead with the President to get the workmen out. And when he told him the story, when he told the story to the President, the President said to Thomas, "Thomas they are innocent. You don't mean the workmen are guilty of treason? Of course the owners and officers and managers could be brought in under the charge of treason, but the innocent workmen!" And Lincoln held his head for a moment and he said, "Has he got the workmen in?" And he said, "Yes he has got the workmen in, the innocent workmen." Well Lincoln said, "Well, there must be some mistake about it, he hasn't the workmen in?" "Yes, he has got them all in," Thomas said. "Well call Stanton in." And Dana said when he said "Call Stanton in", that was the situation, and that there was going to be some fun. When Stanton came in Lincoln addressed him ⁱⁿ very familiar language, in a manner that I am not going to introduce here, but he used expressive words and he said, "You haven't that whole shebang back of the bars down in Baltimore have you?" And Stanton said, "Do you refer to the blanket business?" "Yes that is what I refer to." "Yes I have got them all in." And he said it in such a tone of voice that Dana said Lincoln sat up and he said, "Mr. Secretary, I wouldn't interfere with your orders at all, but is it quite right to put the workmen in?" And Stanton turned around and he said, "Mr. President, you are the law in the matter, if you don't like it, countermand it. But I hope you will regard my position and my responsibility.

Was that all you wanted to see me about, I am awfully busy today, may I be excused?" And Lincoln in his inimitable manner said, "Yes, I am glad you came in, I will excuse you." And he went out. And the minute he went out Lincoln turned to Congressman Thomas and he said, "If you were at the head of a business and had a fellow like that,- if you had a clerk like that fellow what would you do with him?" And Thomas in anger said, "I would dismiss him and get a man that had a little civility." And Lincoln said, "No you wouldn't, if your business was as important as my business, and your clerk was as efficient as Stanton is, you would keep him. The only thing I see about it is, that you do not understand his ways, but I understand him. But you call Judge Holt and he will fix it up, he is the Judge Advocate General from Kentucky under Stanton." And when Holt came in Lincoln said, "Holt, Stanton has got them in prison down in Baltimore and you go with Thomas down to Baltimore and make a report of some kind and let them out. I don't know how to do it, don't ask me any questions but go on and get them out." They went and he did it. And when Holt had let them out and it came to the ear of Stanton, he was summoned before Stanton. And when Holt said it was the President who ordered him to do it Stanton broke out and he said, "Well Holt, we have got to get rid of this baboon in the White House." And when that came to the ear of President Lincoln he lay back and laughed and he said, "Did Stanton say that?" "Yes", he said he did, and his informant said he wouldn't endure his insult. And Lincoln laughed and he said "He didn't insult me at all. All he said was that I was a

baboon, and that is only a matter of opinion sir." (Laughter)

If I had time and wanted to talk on one of the qualities that Lincoln possessed that would be a wonderfully valuable quality for the teacher, I would say it was humor,-- good humor. Good humor, he was not ugly, he was not sarcastic, he never hurled the harpoon and lacerated the feelings. He may have done it in his early life but not when he became mature, never. When General McClellan sent him that telegram, Lincoln's sense of humor came to his rescue. General McClellan felt that he had not freedom to do anything on the field without first getting the consent of Stanton so he sent a telegram just to reflect that situation. He said "Abraham Lincoln, President United States of America and Commander in Chief of the armies of the United States of America: My dear sir: I have the honor to inform you that my army has captured seven cows. What shall I do with them? (Signed) George B. McClellan, General of the Army of the Eastern Division."

Now you can see at once that if Lincoln had been a small soul he would have been offended. But his humor took possession of him and instead of answering it in regular army style, he answered it just as Lincoln would answer it. This is the telegram sent back to General George B. McClellan: "George. Milk them. (Signed) Abe." (Laughter)

Mr. Dana said that Lincoln's ability to control men largely consisted in those two qualities, first humor and second a tenderness that had no bounds. Mr. Lincoln, fellow teachers, had the most pathetic nature of any man that ever was in his

position in the presidency of our country. There is no doubt of it.

I want to give you just one incident to show the tenderness of this man. And this is an incident I received from Mr. Dana. He said that it was the President's custom to go over to the hospital. Why? Why the President would seek out a place like that when he was so sad anyway for a sort of a relief, I do not understand. That was a very common practice, he would go to the hospital. One day he went over and he spent most of the day speaking to this man and that one, to some of the boys that were dying by the inch. And finally he was ready to go and went out to the carriage, and just as he was about to get into the carriage some guard hastened out and he said to the President, "There is a Confederate soldier,- he said a Rebel soldier, in a compartment you did not visit and he is dying. And the surgeon says he cannot live more than only a few hours. He has heard that you are here and he has made a request to see you." Lincoln broke away instantly, Dana said, and excused himself and said, "I will be back in a little while." And the guard led him into the place, and he came up to the cot in the hospital and there was a poor boy, a Confederate soldier. And Lincoln reached for his hand and all the poor fellow would say was this broken sentence, "I knew that they were mistaken, I knew they were mistaken." Nobody knows just what he meant. Lincoln said to him, "I am pretty busy, I have been here much of the day, what can I do for you my poor fellow?" And he said, "I want to see you before I die. The surgeon says I cannot get well."

And Lincoln again said, "What can I do for you?" And he said, "I wanted you to forgive me for the part I have taken in the war." And Lincoln said, "Ask God to forgive you my poor fellow. Why, of course, I forgive you, but now ask Him to forgive you." Then he stooped and took the Confederate's hands in his two hands and stood like that and said, "I am pretty busy, I was just ready to go, I have been here much of the day, and I must be going now. Is there anything else I can do for you before I go?" And he said in his broken tones, the last thing he ever said on earth, "Oh I thought if you did not care, you might stay and see me through." And there stood the President of the nation stooping and the tears dropping upon his coat sleeve.

Ladies and gentlemen, that is the most beautiful picture in American history, this President of the mightiest republic on earth weeping over the dying Confederate soldier who had done everything he could to cut the brittle thread upon which the life of the nation was suspended. But that is Lincoln. You take the strong humor on this side, and the pathos on this side, and you have got a combination that made Lincoln a power over men and a great ruler.

I can only say in conclusion, this, these were the two far reaching attributes of the man that made him great, and his fame will increase with the days. The first, was the broadest humanity of any public man that I have any knowledge of,- expressed in a different form, faith in humanity, he would not believe everything was going wrong. And secondly, and this will be surprising to some people, Abraham Lincoln in my judgment,

was the most profoundly religious character that ever sat in the presidential chair. There is not a public utterance in the form of a great state paper that he did not look to God for guidance.

Standing yonder at Springfield to say goodbye, February 11th, 1860, "Won't you pray for me that the same arm that supported Washington may be my support, for with it I will accomplish my duty, without it I cannot do anything." Won't you notice in the first inaugural, his firm reliance upon Him who has never yet forsaken our favored land, as sufficient to adjust our differences. In the second inaugural, "Woe to the world because of the offenses because they must come, but woe to the men by whom they come." And then, "His judgments are righteous altogether."

Ladies and gentlemen, had I the time I would speak in extenso of the attributes of this man and when I would be through you would think that probably I had dealt in superlative language. But you would excuse me when I would say that as his life went out mine came in. I was rocked in a cradle in the state of Ohio over which was sung the lullaby, "Old Abe Lincoln is dead and gone! Hurrah! Hurrah!" I was taught he was a traitor, and I want you to know I am not the only boy north of the Ohio river that was so taught. And when I came to study into the life of this nation, - for that has been my work for thirty years, - and especially attracted to the Civil war and its tragedy with special reference to the head of the nation, I come to you to say he is the first, the last and the best; the greatest in comprehension; the broadest in statesmanship; the sweetest in disposition; the deepest in humanity of all of this western world. And in view of

the fact that there are problems facing our nation today far more grave than they faced it when he lived, may I ask you to join with me in the sentiment expressed so beautifully in his own words at the famous battlefield of Gettysburg, that we give ~~em~~ the last full measure of devotion of our lives to the nation to which he gave his last and greatest full measure, in order that the nation of the people, for the people, and by the people shall not perish from the earth. Goodbye. (Applause)

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